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Jury selection starts in death of 2-year-old Toddler died after beating, burns in Detroit foster home

Ruby L. Bailey
Special to the Lansing State Journal

Published June 5, 2007

Jury selection was under way Monday in the case of the former Detroit foster mother charged in connection with the August 2006 death of 2-year-old Isaac Lethbridge.

A pool of 48 prospective jurors were called to Wayne County Circuit Court.

Charlsie Adams-Rogers, 59, is charged with involuntary manslaughter in Isaac's death, and two counts of child abuse involving the boy and his 4-year-old sister, who also was in Adams-Rogers' state-licensed foster home.

Isaac died after being beaten and burned in the home on Aug. 16, 2006. Law enforcement authorities have not charged anyone with inflicting the fatal injuries.

Adams-Rogers denied harming the boy, saying it was an "unfortunate accident."

She blamed her 12-year-old adopted daughter. Nearly a dozen people were in the home that day.

Prosecutors sought to charge Adams-Rogers on the theory that, as a licensed foster parent, she was responsible for any harm that may have come to children in her care. She faces up to 15 years in prison if convicted of the most serious charge.

Isaac and his sister were removed from their parents' home on neglect charges in September 2005.

According to a Free Press investigation published earlier this year, the two were placed in three troubled foster homes by the Lula Belle Stewart Center of Detroit.

The state suspended the center's foster care license after Isaac's death.

Defense attorney Warren Harris said he expects a jury would be seated and opening statements would be made Monday. Judge Vera Massey Jones is hearing the case.

Ruby L. Bailey is a reporter for the Detroit Free Press and can be reached at 313-222-6651 or rbailey@freepress.com.

Former foster mom faces charges

- Jury selection continues in the case of the former Detroit foster mother charged in connection with the August 2006 death of 2-year-old Isaac Lethbridge.
- Charlsie Adams-Rogers, 59, is charged with involuntary manslaughter in Isaac's death, and two counts of child abuse involving the boy and his 4-year-old sister, who also was in Adams-Rogers' state-licensed foster home.



Isaac Lethbridge was physically punished, testimony reveals

June 5, 2007

By RUBY L. BAILEY

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Two-year-old Isaac Lethbridge was physically punished for wetting his diaper and left at times for hours in the care of a 12-year-old girl while his foster mother shopped and went to a casino, according to testimony in Wayne County Circuit Court today.

Charlsie Adams-Rogers, 60, is charged with involuntary manslaughter in connection with Isaac's death from blunt-force injuries in her Detroit foster home on Aug. 16, 2006. She also is charged with child abuse involving Isaac and his 4-year-old sister, who was in foster care with Isaac.

Starkemia Taylor told a Wayne County Circuit Court jury that she saw the 12-year-old girl hit Isaac with a belt and her open hand for wetting his diaper and refusing to sit on a potty chair. Adams-Rogers, who had adopted the 12-year-old, has said that the girl accidentally caused Isaac's injuries when playing with him.

Taylor, who has two children by one of Adams-Rogers' sons, also acknowledged that she, Adams-Rogers' son and other relatives smoked marijuana in the home in front of Isaac, his sister and her own children.

In cross-examining Taylor, defense attorney Warren Harris asked Taylor whether she testified against Adams-Rogers because she was upset with her for helping Adams-Rogers' son in a custody battle over their children. Taylor denied it.

Dr. Pierre Morris of Detroit testified that he saw Isaac on Aug. 4 with bruises and that those bruises were healing when he saw him again on Aug. 14, 2006, two days before his death.

Testimony is to continue this afternoon before Judge Vera Massey Jones.

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The crying stopped, and Isaac was dead

A neighbor tells court of boy's last hours at foster home

June 5, 2007

BY RUBY L. BAILEY
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

In the hours before 2-year-old Isaac Lethbridge died of a beating in a Detroit foster home, a child cried loudly enough to be heard next door and an adult female yelled for someone "to shut the damn kid up," neighbor Drunella Jackson testified Monday.

At the time, Jackson lived next door to Charlsie Adams-Rogers, 60, the state-licensed foster mother whose trial on involuntary manslaughter and child abuse charges began Monday in Wayne County Circuit Court.

Jackson was one of two prosecution witnesses who described improper supervision of Isaac and his sister by Adams-Rogers' then 12-year-old adopted daughter and drug use in front of the children.

Adams-Rogers has blamed the girl for causing Isaac's fatal injuries on Aug. 16, but only Adams-Rogers has been charged. The girl told investigators she was playing with Isaac, throwing him onto a mattress but he hit the floor. If convicted of involuntary manslaughter for failing to protect the child while he was in her care, Adams-Rogers could be sentenced to up to 15 years in prison.

She also is charged with two child abuse counts involving Isaac and his 4-year-old sister, who was in foster care with him. If convicted of the more serious abuse charge, Adams-Rogers faces up to four years in prison. The trial, being heard by Judge Vera Massey Jones, is expected to last a week. Jackson said the crying stopped roughly 30-45 minutes before emergency workers arrived at the west-side house.

Jackson lived next door to Adams-Rogers for 16 years.

Under cross-examination by Adams-Rogers' attorney, Warren Harris, Jackson acknowledged that she never called police about the incident, even after later seeing media reports of the death. Her statement was taken by police May 15 after officials contacted her.

Jackson testified that she did call police about people who occasionally came and went late at night at Adams-Rogers' house because they were loud and disruptive. Jackson also said Adams-Rogers frequently used expletives when referring to the children instead of using their names.

A second witness, Starkemia Taylor, mother of one of Adams-Rogers' grandchildren, testified that she and some of Adams-Rogers' older grandsons would "very often" smoke marijuana in the house with Isaac and his sister present.

Adams-Rogers knew about the drug use and sometimes told them to stop, Taylor said.

Both Jackson and Taylor said Adams-Rogers' 12-year-old daughter was left to supervise the children. Taylor said the girl wasn't always happy about it and said "she was sick of watching the kids, that they were getting on her nerves," Taylor testified. Her testimony is to continue today.

Isaac's parents, Matthew and Jennifer Lethbridge of Canton, sat quietly in the courtroom Monday and declined to comment. All 10 of their children have been placed in foster care, including a baby born this spring.

Isaac and his sister were removed from their parents' home in Westland on neglect charges in September 2005.

According to a Free Press investigation published in January, the two were placed in three troubled foster homes by the Lula Belle Stewart Center of Detroit. The state suspended the center's license to place children in foster care after Isaac's death.

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Ex-foster mom's parenting skills focus at trial in tot's fatal beating

June 4, 2007

By RUBY L. BAILEY
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

A Wayne County Circuit Court jury today heard conflicting portrayals of the former Detroit foster mother charged in connection with the fatal beating and burning of 2-year-old Isaac Lethbridge, who was killed in her home on Aug. 16, 2006.

Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Lisa Lindsey said Charlsie Adams-Rogers, 60, failed to protect the boy and his 4-year-old sister, who was with him in foster care, from being abused in her home.

“Being a parent is more than a matter of simple biology,” Lindsey said. “If you do it right, the child will survive and thrive. If you do it wrong, the consequences could be fatal. Defendant Rogers did it wrong.”

But defense attorney Warren Harris said Adams-Rogers, who retired from Chrysler after 30 years, had been a model foster parent who cared for dozens of children who came into her home from sometimes-abusive circumstances since the mid-1990s.

“There’s a lot of love being passed around in that house,” Harris said.

Police still have not charged anyone with directly causing the boy’s death. Adams-Rogers is charged with involuntary manslaughter, accused of failing to protect the child while he was in her care. She also is charged with two child abuse counts involving the boy and his sister. If convicted, she could be sentenced to up to 15 years in prison on the manslaughter charge and up to 4 years on the most serious child abuse count.

Adams-Rogers has blamed her then-12-year-old adopted daughter with causing the boy’s death, and Harris reiterated that claim today in court. No one else has been charged in the case.

Isaac and his sister were removed from their parents’ home in Westland on neglect charges in September 2005. According to a Free Press investigation published in January, the two children were placed in three troubled foster homes by the Lula Belle Stewart Center of Detroit. The state suspended the center’s foster care license after Isaac’s death.

Fourteen jurors, four men and 10 women, were seated from a pool of 48. Judge Vera Massey Jones is hearing the case.

Isaac’s parents, Matt and Jennifer Lethbridge, sat quietly in the courtroom today. All 10 of their children have been placed in foster care, including a baby born this spring.



Sex suspect rejects deal, heads for trial

Tuesday, June 05, 2007

The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- An accused molester turned down a plea agreement Monday that would have avoided a trial in Kent County and another in Allegan County.

Prosecutors claim Jamie VanKlaveren, 26, has molested up to 18 youths.

Assistant Kent County Prosecutor Helen Brinkman presented a plea agreement that would have him pleading guilty to five counts of criminal sexual conduct with all other charges dropped.

The cases will go to trial, but probably not before August, as the multiple charges will be combined into one case.

On May 22, VanKlaveren waived a probable cause hearing in Allegan District Court, moving the case to the Circuit Court there.

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Saving children

New family intervention effort more than justified here

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Tuesday, June 05, 2007

By Journal Editorial Board

The horrendous number of abused children in Genesee County's court system calls for not just breaking a vicious cycle, but blasting it to pieces. The best hope so far is found in a proposed program that promises swift, aggressive, holistic intervention, which has succeeded in early stages in other states.

A key model was tried in Florida, which evaluations say is working as intended. Called "Zero to 3," it recognizes that children mistreated or neglected in those early years of life might well become societal problems for the duration, unless there is instantaneous interference.

At the courts' first sign, the idea is to unleash a team reaction to provide counseling, mentoring, home visits - and where justified - action to remove parental rights. Violent-prone parents get a message to change immediately, or pay severe consequences.

Genesee County courts cry out for such a program - from reports of more than 1,700 children involved in its caseload, of whom 408 are age 3 or younger.

The Florida-like pilot is proposed for Wayne and Midland counties as well. In Genesee County, Chief Probate Judge Robert E. Weiss has been assigned to oversee its creation.

There already is a so-called test case involving one JoJo Love, whose alleged attempt to kick his girlfriend misfired, the foot landing on the head of Love's 2-month-old son as the child lay in his mother's arms. The child has been moved to foster care, hopefully into safer hands.

The most optimistic aspect of the program is an early track record of excellent results, racked up not just in Florida but also in Texas, Mississippi and Iowa. History amassed so far shows that where immediate, intense intervention was tried, there were few or no new complaints of abuse and neglect involving the same families.

Implementing it here will take courage, toughness and lots of money. But the case for forging ahead has been made over many years, no matter what the challenges or sacrifice.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Tuesday, June 05, 2007

Children will become what they are taught

Everyone is wondering why our young people are so angry and violent. You don't have to look much further than a child's home environment to find the answer.

Recently, I went to a local supermarket and pulled in next to a van. Inside that van were several small children. The dad walked up to the vehicle and started yelling at the children in the most vulgar language I have ever heard directed toward a child. He was angry about something which had occurred in the store. He threatened to knock the f--- out of one of the children. He told him he didn't care who was watching, he would f--- him up. The female inside the vehicle chimed in with similar language.

I couldn't help but think if they acted like this in public, I can't imagine the way the children are treated at home. My first thought was to say something to the two of them. However, I feared for my own safety. I felt if they had no respect for themselves or their children, they certainly wouldn't have any for me. It's a sad world when children can't even trust their own parents to treat them with love and respect.

As I walked in the store, I had to hold back tears. The only thing I could do was pray that somewhere, somehow, someone would rescue those children. When children are taught hatred and violence, they will exhibit those exact characteristics.

R. Williams
Kalamazoo



At age 13, is boy a sexual predator?

Tuesday, June 05, 2007

By John Tunison

The Grand Rapids Press

WEST OLIVE -- When he was 12, a Grand Haven Township boy landed on the state's juvenile sex-offender registry after he assaulted a woman at the Meijer store in Georgetown Township last year.

Now, accused in a more serious sex assault of a woman near his home, prosecutors want to make sure he makes the adult registry when he turns 18.

"I would want to know if he was living next to me," Ottawa County Assistant Prosecutor Judy Mulder said.

Fathi Cullen, now 13, was charged with home invasion and second-degree criminal sexual conduct Monday in Ottawa County Juvenile Court and held in detention. Court records show he has a history of sexually deviant behavior that began in late 2005 with indecent exposure and seemed to escalate from there.

Cullen was still on probation Saturday when police say he followed an 18-year-old woman into her home in the River Haven Village mobile home park. The boy lives in the area.

Authorities did not detail the alleged crime. They said the boy sexually assaulted her but did not commit rape. Before Cullen was apprehended later the same day near Hofma Park, police said, he tried to grope two girls, ages 12 and 14.

Court officials said sex assault suspects that young are rare.

"And as far as repeat offenders, it's pretty uncommon," county Juvenile Services Director Pat VerDuin said. "The aggressive nature of this case is very unusual, and that's a concern."

The boy's parents, Antonio and Sandra Cullen, refused to comment Monday.

Last year, the boy was convicted of fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct for the April assault at Meijer and ordered to undergo sex offender treatment. Earlier this year, he violated his probation when he was caught accessing sexual Web sites on school computers and touched a school staff member inappropriately.

It wasn't immediately known where Cullen attended school. Grand Haven Public Schools officials said he is not a student there.

The victim from the Meijer assault said the boy left her scared and shocked after he approached her in the store and said "Hey, you're hot," before he started grabbing for her breasts and groin area.

"I was hysterical. I was freaking out," recalled the woman, who did not want to be named. "I ended up punching him in the face to get him to stop."

She said Cullen, less than 5 feet tall, was sitting on a bench when she entered the store and he followed her.

"I thought he was going to ask me to help find his mom or something," she said.

She believes the boy should be in jail and said something needs to be done to change his behavior.

"He is just going to get bigger and older and might be able to overpower someone," she said. "What kind of kid does this?"

Mulder, the assistant prosecutor, said juvenile convictions for criminal sexual conduct in the first- or second-degree require a youth's name to be placed on the adult sex offender registry when they turn 18. Only the adult registry is a public list, with names on the state's Web site.

"We are definitely going to pursue this charge to the fullest extent," she said. "This is a very serious case."

After Saturday's assault, police said they were able to identify the boy because he dropped or left an item in the victim's home.

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KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Going hungry Food-stamp use spikes in Michigan

Tuesday, June 05, 2007

By Sarah Kellogg

Gazette Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- About 86,000 more Michigan residents found themselves on food stamps last year, contributing to a whopping 76.8 percent increase in use of the federal food program in Michigan between 2001 and 2006, a report released today shows.

Michigan had the fifth-highest recipient growth rate in the country since 2002, according to the Food Research and Action Center, a Washington-based food advocacy group that annually looks at how government initiatives such as food stamps and school breakfast and lunch programs are used.

"Michigan certainly is among the hardest-hit economies in the states right now," said Terri Stangl, executive director of the Center for Civil Justice, an anti-poverty group with offices in Flint and Saginaw. "We are one of the most extreme examples of what happens when the economy goes bad, and food stamps are part of filling the gap for families."

In 2006, Michigan averaged 1.1 million recipients per month using food stamps to supplement their food budgets. Michigan recipients accessed \$1.2 billion in federal food-stamp assistance in 2006 -- up \$140 million from the year before.

Michigan families living on that assistance are still scraping just to get by, advocates say.

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KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Filling the gap when food stamps don't

Tuesday, June 05, 2007

More than a million people in Michigan relied on food stamps last year -- an increase of 76.8 percent since 2001.

That's more than a million reasons to be concerned about the reauthorization of the federal food stamp program, part of the Farm Bill now sitting in Congress' Agriculture committees.

Federal tax cuts, combined with an expensive war, are compelling congressional budgeters to look at domestic programs to cut.

Unfortunately, food stamp recipients have been enduring de facto cuts since 1996, when congress cut the program's maximum benefit. While the maximum benefit hasn't changed, food prices continue to rise. The result is that food stamp recipients have seen their purchasing power erode.

And more, the same year, Congress froze the standard deduction that food stamp households may subtract from their income to \$134 for all household sizes. Before that, the standard deduction was indexed each year to the rate of inflation.

The combined actions mean that today a three-person household is receiving an average of \$37 in assistance each month. That may not sound like much, but to many low-income families, it makes an enormous difference.

And it makes an enormous difference to the local non-profit agencies that try to make certain no one in the Kalamazoo area goes hungry.

The eroding purchasing power of food stamps means that more families are looking for emergency food assistance from Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes or are seeking free meals at Ministry With Community. In 1995, Loaves and Fishes filled nearly 40,000 two-day orders of emergency food. In 2005, it was nearly 68,000 two-day orders.

At Ministry With Community, which serves breakfast and lunch, the number of meals served has increased 11 percent over last year.

Private agencies have been trying to fill the gap. But a chronically stagnant state economy is putting more and more pressure on the private non-profit sector to make certain that low-income families aren't going without.

Last month, the House Hunger Caucus challenged members to attempt to live for a week on \$21 worth of food -- the amount the average food stamp recipient receives per week. The aim was to help members of Congress, who will reauthorize the food stamp program this year, get an understanding of how difficult it is to live on food stamps.

Only four members of Congress -- including the two co-chairs of the House Hunger Caucus -- participated.

The results were not healthy.

Participating members found that, instead of buying fresh fruits and vegetables and lean meats, they were resorting to cheaper high-fat meats and high-sodium or high-sugar canned fruits and vegetables. They opted for starchy, high-calorie foods to fill them up.

It's too bad that no other members of Congress were interested in the experience. It would have given them

greater insight into the way an increasing number of Americans are forced to live.

As the economy continues to constrict, more people are losing their jobs and families are falling on hard times. Clearly, they need a safety net.

And the world's richest nation clearly has a responsibility to provide for its poor and help the downtrodden get back on their feet.

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Seniors vulnerable to violence, exploitation

Agencies work to develop strategies to better protect elderly residents

By Dave Groves

Journal Register News Service

TROY -- Looking only to help someone she thought she could trust, 73-year-old Troy resident Violet List opened her home to a 17-year-old acquaintance last October.

According to police and prosecutors, List lost her life as result of that decision.

Anthony Robert Strozier stands charged with first-degree murder after allegedly trying to steal a Social Security check in List's name from her 38-year-old daughter.

During the attempted robbery, List suffered a heart attack that the Oakland County Medical Examiner's Office attributed to both heart disease and blunt-force chest trauma.

With a trial scheduled to begin June 18, Strozier will face life in prison without parole if convicted. Regardless of the case's outcome, however, his elderly patron appears to have paid the ultimate price for offering kindness.

"A lot of times, we don't find out about this violent kind of behavior until it's too late," said Derek Meinecke, an Oakland County assistant prosecutor who has handled a number of similar cases involving abuse and exploitation of senior citizens and other vulnerable adults.

Looking to address the problem before such tragedies result, Meinecke joined forces with a broad-based group of civic-minded individuals and organizations who'd like to see physical, emotional and financial abuse of senior citizens prevented.

"We're well aware of the problem and moving aggressively to take care of it," Meinecke said.

Mobilization

Two years ago, local representatives of senior citizen service providers, financial institutions, law enforcement, the judicial system, health care organizations and state and local community service agencies came together to find better ways of protecting this increasingly targeted population.

The Saving Adults who are Vulnerable and Elderly Task Force of Oakland County started with discussions about how partner agencies could work with each other to more effectively respond to incidents of elder abuse and exploitation.

"What we've really done is open the lines of communication," said Lynn Alexander, senior citizen advocate for Oakland County.

She noted that with a broader understanding of the resources available within each partner agency, members are more empowered to prevent, detect, report or intervene in cases involving physical and emotional harm or fraud.

"The reporting of elder abuse has not been what it should be," Alexander said. "The problem is not that people aren't good hearted, but they might just not know what to do about it when they see it."

If police are better trained to detect signs of abuse against the elderly, for example, they may be more inclined to seek intervention from the state's Adult Protective Services agency.

Likewise, bank tellers may be more inclined to report unusual banking activity if they know the signs of financial exploitation and who is in the best position to intervene.

Dianne Shovely, vice president for fraud services at Comerica Bank, said all of the company's tellers are trained to recognize signs of exploitation.

"As we increase awareness, we find the number of reported incidents goes up," she said. "It's difficult to tell whether (the incident rate) is increasing or if it's always been there and we're just beginning to detect it more."

Expansion

The SAVE collaborative has come to realize that preventing elder abuse will require an awareness campaign reaching well beyond its membership. In no small part, this is because the target population is growing so rapidly.

The U.S. Census Bureau projects that the 65 and older segment of society, which totaled 35 million people in 2000, will expand to 70 million by 2030.

The implications of this trend become alarming when coupled with a National Center on Elder Abuse estimate suggesting that as many as 1 in 10 senior citizens are injured, exploited or otherwise mistreated by caregivers.

A 2004 NCEA report indicated that the number of substantiated cases of elder abuse and exploitation rose from 166,019 to 191,908 in just four years. The problem is likely far larger, however.

First, statistics tracking reported cases are far from uniformly collected and published in the 50 states. Furthermore, some studies suggest that just one of every 14 abuse cases and only one of every 25 financial exploitation cases are reported at all.

SAVE members believe that only by expanding the awareness campaign to the general public will society be fully empowered to prevent abuse and properly report it.

"Really, the main thing is to build public awareness. Now is the time, because our aging population is growing," said Oakland Circuit Judge Edward Sosnick, a founding member of the collaborative. "Hopefully we're going to save some lives and prevent people from being victimized."

Toward that end, SAVE is hosting an International Elder Abuse Awareness Day event at Crittenton Hospital Medical Center in Rochester on June 14.

Edification

The SAVE collaborative is embarking on a challenging campaign. Many of the issues relevant to awareness, prevention and intervention are both broad and complex. Hence, there is a great deal for interested parties to learn.

Generally speaking, the problem can be divided into four categories -- violent acts committed by either random strangers or people familiar to the victim, and financial exploitation by either random strangers or people familiar to the victim.

Advocates of elderly and vulnerable adults say preventing violent crimes committed by strangers involves the same kind of precautionary measures any person should take, but also should incorporate the realization that this population is increasingly being targeted because of its limited ability to fight back.

Perhaps the more ominous threat, however, is violence committed by people familiar to their victims.

Troy Police Officer and SAVE advocate Andy Breidenich said these cases often require a coordinated response from public service agencies because victims and those concerned about them may be afraid or unable to report the incidents.

He added police agencies must be better trained to detect signs of abuse and to properly report them to prosecutors and human service agencies.

"This does not require more forms," Breidenich said. "What I'm trying to say is that it just requires more emphasis."

Advocates say that in financial exploitation situations involving strangers, seniors and those responsible for managing their finances must become more aware of a growing number of Internet scams, get-rich-quick schemes, phony sweepstakes, home improvement scams and the like.

In cases where elderly adults lack the wherewithal to fend off such ploys, loved ones can be appointed a conservator. This affords full authority and control over a ward's finances. Experts note that the process of securing conservatorship is closely scrutinized by the courts, however.

"We are taking away a person's liberty in appointing a conservator, so there are all kinds of safeguards," said James Lampertius, an elder law attorney based in Farmington Hills.

Threats posed by those familiar to elderly or vulnerable victims are often harder to prevent. They also tend to be far more devastating.

"Where the seniors really lose their money is when it's someone known to them who's taking it," Shovelvly said. "Without their financial resources, what we see is that these victims are just devastated."

Again, advocates note that a coordinated community response is needed in such situations.

In any case, SAVE members say that awareness is the first and most effective step toward prevention.

"This is really what we're looking to integrate," Alexander said. "Thankfully, I think things are beginning to change."

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http://www.dailytribune.com/stories/060407/loc_seniors001.shtml

Migrant workers face unsanitary conditions

By KEVIN WALKER
Michigan Correspondent

LANSING, Mich. — State employees have gone south this winter searching for migrant laborers willing to come to Michigan, but there are concerns that conditions for these potential workers are not adequate.

"We have had a shortage of seasonal workers in Michigan the past couple of years," said Janet Howard, deputy director of the Bureau of Workforce Programs, a division of the Department of Labor and Economic Growth (DLEG).

State officials traveled to Texas earlier this month and met with 400-500 migrant families at nine different sites.

The officials showed a promotional video called *Venga a Michigan!*, which is Spanish for *Come to Michigan*.

Howard denied that there is a new campaign going on and said that all the buzz about these trips may be due to the video, which is something new.

"These meetings have been going on for years," she said. "Our efforts have not increased. I would say that it's out of proportion (to say) that it's something special."

Martha Gonzalez-Cortes, director of Michigan's Office of Migrant Affairs, said that after she watched the "Venga a

Michigan!" video, she wondered if they were painting too rosy a picture.

Many migrants are on their own when it comes to housing in the state, she said. The recruitment meetings directed at migrant workers are done in concert with the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL).

Children at work

While state officials try to lure more migrant laborers to Michigan, some employers are failing to provide adequate housing and employment conditions for the ones already here.

In December the DOL announced the recovery of \$53,541 in minimum wage and overtime back pay for 176 workers at farms in 14 Michigan counties in 2006. It issued nearly \$32,000 in fines for youth employment and migrant housing violations following investigations of a variety of agricultural operations.

"Among the violations we found were children as young as seven years old picking blueberries in the fields," said James Smith, director of the DOL's Wage and Hour Division in Detroit, in a news release.

"Youngsters under the age of 16 (were) working on a conveyer line in a processing plant, operating hazardous machinery and working long hours in fruit packing plants.

(continued on page 2)

Migrant workers face ...

(continued from page 1)

"We also found dangerous and unsanitary housing conditions provided to migrant workers and their families," Smith said.

Fines and back wages

The Wage and Hour Division issued \$10,587 in youth employment fines to four employers in Van Buren, Ottawa and Berrien counties. In addition it levied \$21,150 in penalties to 12 employers in Kent, Berrien, Van Buren, Newaygo and Oceana counties for violations of the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act (MSPA).

These were primarily for housing violations.

Smith said that substandard housing included leaking propane gas, electrical hazards, pest infestations, a lack of clean water for hand washing or bathing and discharge of sewage directly onto the ground.

Back wages were owed to 176 workers in Monroe, Oceana and Van Buren counties as a result of minimum wage or overtime pay violations.

"I think it's a substantial problem," Gonzalez-Cortes said. "It's important that somebody be really vigilant and go after these bad actors."

Gonzalez-Cortes said she's gotten feedback from growers who are happy that enforcement has been stepped up. She said these growers see themselves as at a competitive disadvantage when some growers violate the rules.

A recent study commissioned by the state showed that Michigan has more than 90,000 migrants, including non-working family members. Michigan has one of the largest populations of migrants in the country.

"I think it's a substantial problem. It's important that somebody be really vigilant and go after these bad actors."

-Martha Gonzalez-Cortes



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Published June 5, 2007

Layoffs unlikely for most workers with budget deal

Unpaid days off still possible for a few state departments

Chris Andrews
Lansing State Journal

Most state workers will avoid temporary layoffs, and Michigan residents will be spared a wholesale shutdown of government services this summer.

Budget agreements reached between Gov. Jennifer Granholm and state lawmakers last week eliminated the need for most state agencies to consider shutting down major parts of their operations to cut costs.

However, the Department of Human Services, and perhaps a couple of others, have not ruled out unpaid days off to close budget gaps.

The Department of Community Health has a budget problem too, but officials don't believe temporary layoff days will be necessary.

Kelli Face, a Community Health employee, said unpaid days off would create a hardship for her.

"Gas prices are going up, grocery prices are going up, I have a high mortgage," said Face, a Charlotte resident who has worked for the state for 21 years. "So, if I get days off without pay, layoff days, that's cutting into me making my mortgage payment, not to mention my other bills."

Warnings for months

For the past several months, Granholm warned of a possible partial government shutdown if lawmakers couldn't agree on other ways to eliminate a potential state deficit of several hundred million dollars.

The Civil Service Commission approved layoff rules for nonunionized workers, and the Office of the State Employer notified unions of possible layoffs as soon as June 22.

Granholm spokeswoman Liz Boyd said that while the budget deal means a massive shutdown is no longer contemplated, individual departments may need to use layoffs to balance budgets. And there is no budget agreement for the 2008 fiscal year that begins Oct. 1.

Department of Human Services Director Marianne Udow sent an e-mail to her employees Monday

At a glance

- While it appears that most state workers will avoid temporary layoffs, the Department of Human Services, and perhaps a couple of others, have not ruled out unpaid days off to close budget gaps.

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informing them the department still has a \$6 million budget problem.

"We are doing everything we can to find alternatives, but given the magnitude of the shortfall we are facing, we are not able to rule out the need for layoffs in our department before the end of the 2007 fiscal year," she wrote.

The State Court Administrator's Office said it won't need to resort to mandatory unpaid days off. That came after 75 workers agreed to take off voluntarily a total of 534 days without pay by Sept. 30.

'Could be a lot worse'

Charlie Mercer, an information technology specialist for the courts, agreed to take two days off without pay.

He said he hopes everyone will try to help out.

"I talked to my wife about it. You know, it could be a lot worse," said Mercer, who lives in Mason. "I have a lot of friends in the automotive industry who are worried about more than just a day or two."

As it stands now, the Michigan Court of Appeals is the only agency that has imposed paid days off.

The courts shut down for two days connected to the Memorial Day holiday. Three other two-day closures are planned.

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